

SEMAPHORE

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NEW GUINEA WW2 – A MARITIME CAMPAIGN

To most Australians the campaign fought against the Japanese in New Guinea during WW2 is typified by images of Australian diggers and ‘fuzzy-wuzzy angels’ struggling along the Kokoda Track or fighting hand to hand at Milne Bay. Very few would consider this to have been a maritime campaign, yet this is exactly what it was, for the final arbiter of victory or defeat in the jungles of New Guinea was maritime power.

Following Japan’s attack on the United States Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, the sinking of Force Z (*HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse*), and the subsequent defeat of Allied naval forces in the Battles of the Java Sea and Sunda Strait, the Imperial Japanese Navy had achieved control of the seas in the South Pacific. This enabled her to project her military forces into the islands north of Australia. By 23 January 1942 Rabaul had fallen and became the location of the Japanese forward headquarters. In order to protect Rabaul the Japanese occupied Lae and Salamaua on 8 March. However, the Japanese were soon to find that the capture of Lae did not ensure the security of Rabaul from air attacks, and they decided to capture Port Moresby by amphibious assault.

That the Japanese intended to conduct an amphibious assault on Port Moresby (*Operation MO*) had become known to the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet through the work of USN and RAN code breakers. As a result of this intelligence Task Force 17, built around the aircraft carriers *USS Lexington* and *USS Yorktown*, was sent to the Coral Sea to engage the Japanese. Also assigned to Task Force 17 was a cruiser squadron under command of Rear Admiral J. Crace RN, which included *HMAS Australia* and *HMAS Hobart*. Prior to the battle Rear Admiral F.J. Fletcher, USN directed Admiral Crace to patrol the Jomard Passage at the eastern tip of New Guinea. The Port Moresby Invasion Force, which included the light carrier *Shoho*, was provided with distant cover by the aircraft carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*. As it approached the Jomard Passage the Invasion Force learnt of the presence of Admiral Crace’s cruisers and halted awaiting the outcome of the impending carrier battle further to the south. Although in the ensuing Battle of the Coral Sea the Americans lost the *Lexington*, the Japanese carriers were in no condition to support the further advance of the Port Moresby Invasion Force, which by this time had lost the *Shoho*. Rather than fight their way through the cruiser blocking force the Japanese retired to Rabaul.

Failure to take Port Moresby by amphibious assault did not deter the Japanese. They immediately commenced planning to take Port Moresby by assault from the land. This would entail a landing at Buna, which was undertaken on 21 July, and an advance across the Owen Stanley Ranges. All the logistics required by the Japanese to support this assault, and the Allies to oppose it, had to be carried by ships. So began the struggle for control of the sea-lanes.

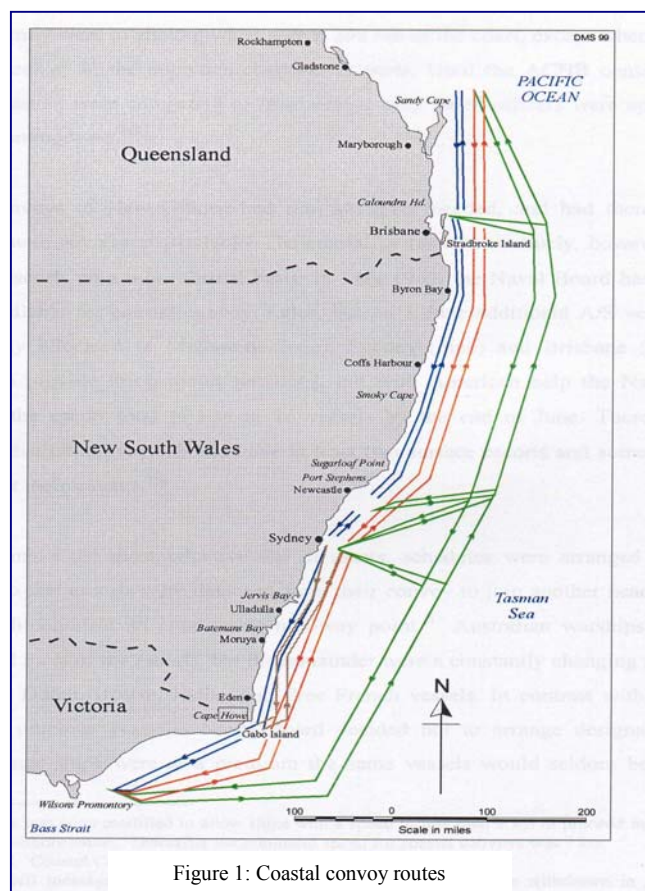


Figure 1: Coastal convoy routes

From May 1942 Japanese submarine operations off Australia’s east coast began to take a toll on shipping. By August seven ships had been sunk and a further six damaged. Convoys were organised to protect this vital shipping and the First Naval Member was designated the Commander South West Pacific Sea Frontiers. Fortunately for the Allies the Japanese failed to allocate sufficient resources to the submarine campaign and this, coupled with a lack of strategic intelligence, ensured that



